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THE LOCK OF GREY HAIR.

By ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

There hung on conspicuously there amid the surrounding mop of fine dark hair that it pinned the curiosity of Dr. Blane's friends more than any other detail of his very distinguished appearance. Grief, said a good number, had caused it; anxiety, declared others; but the majority, including servants and women, plumped of course for love. He was successful, and he was unmarried; the evidence was unanswerable. I believe, however, that I am the only living person who holds the true secret.

"Most people who have really lived," he used to say, "possess some singular experience or other that they do not care about telling indiscriminately. And this is mine. I'm a little ashamed of it," he added, "for nowadays we explain everything, or confess ourselves unscientific. Besides"—he shrugged his shoulders—"my conduct, I always feel, was not strictly professional perhaps from the best sense. And, also, it was the only time in my life when I was obliged to acknowledge a sense of unreasoning fear—and yield to it!"

And the story, it must be confessed, certainly would have strained belief more readily in those picturesque times when "Possession," diabolical or otherwise, was a prevalent superstition, and when the post mortem activity of a disembodied spirit was held to be often exceedingly lively.

It happened before the days when Dr. Blane's skill had earned for him the honours of knighthood, together with the privilege of Inspectorship of Royal diseases. This, somewhat, is also he told it to me shortly before his own death—

With an intimate friend, it appears, he was revisiting a little village in the Swiss Jura, where he had been in learn French as a boy, when the friend incontinently was laid low with diphtheria, and he stayed out perforce to nurse him. Both men had their meals in the cosy little Pension de La Poste, where twenty years before they had studied grammar and irregular verbs together; but Dr. Blane, who wanted quiet, had his work and bed room in Michaud's new house at the other end of the village, where the view yards begin.

Now, the epidemic it so happened, was a severe one, and two other persons—but for whom this thing might not have come about—were also laid low—one, the village mesdaljuge, Dr. Bucommun, the other Mlle. Udriet, a wealthy but avaricious old woman, whose personality was of dark and sinister odour throughout the whole countryside, and who, on account of her intense miserliness, was known generally as "la maison vaine riche." And she was well named, for village wit has a way of hitting the nail on the head. She was an evil woman, with great force of individuality, dreaded by all; and her fear of spending money went to amazing lengths. It was even reported of her that she enticed her neighbours' cats into her big house, slew and roasted them with her own hands, and ate them to save a butcher's bill. Her long finger nails and certain other unappetising peculiarities were evidence, the village held, for anything and everything.

And Dr. Blane, who was sent for to prescribe in the temporary absence of Dr. Bucommun, admits that the moment he crossed the threshold of this dismantling room and saw the old miser staring darkly at him from her bed he was inspired by an instant and singularly powerful aversion for her face he always described as truly venomous, and her thin fingers, lying on the coverlet, were twisted and be-jewelled—he used to describe it with a shuddering laugh, "like the feet of a great bird of prey. Here for the first time in his life, was a person he hated afterwards, whom he would rather have helped to die than to live.

Though ashamed of his revulsion, he could not quite control it. The fact that she would never pay his fees was nothing. It was the woman herself. She was like some great loathsome insect in that dark room, he said; some insect, sense, whose sting was death.

The situation at first was merely unpleasant, but a little later it became intensely acute, and furnished Dr. Blane with the excuse for what he terms his unprofessional conduct. For the village doctor got better—well enough to crawl out and see his pet patients, and a messenger was despatched to Dr. Blane to say he was no longer needed by Dr. Bucommun, and Dr. Blane as often as present, disliked the unpleasant and wealthy upon the shoulders of the local practitioner.

Plainly, but he avoided seeing her, even refused point blank to do so, until the old woman, when she found that he no longer came, suffered paroxysms of rage that the ordinary resulting in. Not considered him.

It was one night, just on the end of March when the matter came to a climax. Raining in the evening. Mlle. Udriet, apparently in a private, had sent him an imperious summons, and Dr. Blane, not without pride of conscience, had passed on the summons by messenger to his colleague at the other end of the village. Dr. Bucommun, however, was detained for several hours, with the unfortunate result that a most valuable niche lay neglected to the end.

The Englishman, of course, knew nothing of this. He was in the Pension sitting by the side of his friend, reading. It was ten o'clock. Shaded candles stood on the little table and the sick man was sleeping peacefully the sleep of recovery. For twenty four hours there had been no return of the delirium. At last end of the darkened room Mme. Favre, who owned the Pension, and had proved herself a devoted nurser, was in the act of mixing a tumbler of Eau Sedlitz—her invariable remedy for all complaints—when, only two things—two quite surprising things—happened simultaneously: the sick man sat bolt upright in bed with startling abruptness, stared fiercely into the dim room in front of him, and pointed; while Mme. Favre let fall her tumbler with a crash upon the floor and uttered a voice of genuine alarm. "Who is it? Somebody pushed past me! There's some one else in the room!"

The singular was these two persons acted on the same instant impressed Dr. Blane unpleasantly—inwardly. He was conscious a moment of a disagreeable thrill—of something that brought the water with a rush to his eyes and made the skin of his back crawl. Yet, of course, he never for one moment believed that anyone had really entered the room through the closed doors.

A return of the delirium, he said quietly, as his friend continued to glare about him and to point. And then added more sternly. There's no need for alarm, Mme. Favre, I assure you," for the old lady was leaning, pale and terrified, against the cupboard, and staring towards the bed as though her eyes would drop out.

But the patient, of course, absorbed his immediate attention. To the doctor there could be nothing very unusual about a scene of delirium; yet about this particular scene of delirium, he became sharply and unpleasantly aware, there was something very unusual indeed. It was strangely and horribly real. To begin with, though the sick man had forgotten his French almost to the simplest phrases, he was now gabbling the language with a speed and fluency that were positively uncanny; and at the same time with a vehemence, a passion, a fury that had characterised none of his former attacks; moreover—most disturbing of all—with a thin, whispering voice that was beyond question not his own.

But of the whole wild torrent, all he, and for that matter all Mme. Favre, could catch before it subsided into an abrupt silence were the short phrases, uttered with eyes fixed upon the doctor, and hand pointed into his very face: "You passed me! . . . But now I am out, and I shall not pass you by."

The singular thing, however—and it was this that gave the good woman the crise de nerfs that ended in a fainting fit—the singular thing was that as the changed voice poured out of the sick man, his face altered visibly as well, altered too into the lineaments of another visage that they both knew. How the eyes and mouth of a man could slip into the shape of a woman—an evil, vindictive woman—is beyond the power of description, yet the calm, experienced Dr. Blane as well as the frightened old lady at the end of the room both recognised beyond possibility of discussion that voice, face, and manner belonged to the evil, pitiless, and hated Mlle. Udriet, and no woman, la mauvaise riche. In the eyes, perhaps, the resemblance was strongest. It was unmistakable. It was wholly impressive.

Then it all passed as quickly as it came. The sick man sank peacefully into more. Mme. Favre pulled herself together, assisted by the judicious aid of cold water, and half an hour later Dr. Blane, bathing already with vivid sensations of alarm such as he had never known before in his life, left the Pension to go back to his own rooms.

His shortest way lay down the village street, past the house of Mlle. Udriet, and so across. Yet the doctor deliberately chose the longer route. He admits it frankly. He did not wish to pass the house. "I was curiously nervous, almost frightened," he said, "though exactly of what I could not tell. I came out of La Poste into the night and trembling. It was the most unaccountable sensation I have ever known. Rather, perhaps, the dread of that woman's house I'd have walked a mile."

So he went home by a roundabout way of perhaps fifteen minutes. The village was utterly deserted, and the night air swept about him with the scent of early spring from the surrounding forests. In his mind, however, he still saw his friend's changed face and heard the whispered words as, evidently uttered, "You passed me by. Now I'm out I shan't pass you by." And do what he might he could not dismiss them. The words got into time with the echo of his feet on the hard road.

A little more than half-way his path joined the main street, and then turned to the left, and ran between low stone walls to Michaud's house. Beyond the walls were vineyards, with hundreds of bare sticks already planted in the earth.

And it was here, as he passed the fountain, that he first heard a noise that sent the blood tingling up about his ears. The mountain water splashed, came and went, with a steady fall, but what he heard had nothing to do with that. It was the sound of small feet pattering along under the deep shade of the houses.

Something was following him. It's a dog," he said, yet at the same time he knew quite well it was not a dog. It was on two feet, not on four. Fear dropped cold and wet over his face.

The road sloped the whole way to where Dr. Michaud house stands isolated from the rest of the village among the vineyard, and Dr. Blane quickened his pace almost to a run. He found the excuse that he was cold, though he was perfectly aware the chill of the cold he felt was not the common cold of night.

In a time he resisted the desire to look round, but before he was half-way down the hill the moon emerged from the clouds, and Dr. Blane, with a sudden movement as though expected to be attacked from behind—so alleged afterwards turned.

The village street in the pale sutter moonlight was empty. Black shadows lined its sides, but none he pierced the says, fat about crossed the open road between the lights of Mme. Favre and the great mountain of Blanche with its dark army of pine trees. Nothing moved. But then it was empty.

Nothing moved. But then the spaces of the open moon lit road close behind him carried the sound of light pattering feet. The steps still kept pace.

The way this creeping fear had begun to master him was beyond all things strange. He pulled himself together with a great effort of will and continued his way. He walked, he admits now, better to run, he walked, was to admit the terror that was in him. Yet, somehow, he could not. He had absolutely re-established his nerves. He had beyond all reach of re-control. He stopped with fixed and frightened eyes. He could be at once aware that the woman was behind him, and that she was not there. He was conscious suddenly of two separate and contradictory sensations, of two separate and contradictory states of consciousness. And there, in the middle of the road, he stood, while the steps behind him came on and on, and the moon, sailing out from behind a cloud, flooded the whole village with light.

Then, suddenly, he realised that the steps had ceased. They were no longer behind him. They were in front of him. They were coming down the hill from the direction of Michaud's house. And they were coming fast.

Dr. Blane, he says, realised above all—except that I was being followed with some sinister purpose.

Keeping to the middle of the road, however, Dr. Blane refused now to quicken his steps. It was remarkable how dead, how deserted the whole village seemed. Not one light was about, lights were out in every house. Wind, the only sound in the world, with its mysterious and genuine cold possessed the world. And those soft, pattering, footsteps, making their way without a single false step between moments of utmost trouble, ran ever beside him on the other side of the road.

At last the outline of the house loomed out before him, and he entered the iron gates. A look, a glance, a moment's hard courage, and he had the lock with his key. A spurt of gravel pelted up to the door, and as he stooped to insert the key he was conscious of a head peering leap the wall, and land with a kind of bunched shuffle on the other side, close behind him. He turned with an exclamation half cry, half curse—again with the instinctive idea of protecting himself from the woman suddenly at his elbow through the door, and Michaud, his assistant, opened it.

The sounds ceased. Dr. Blane passed hurriedly in. Never was light or human presence more welcome.

"I'll close after you," said Michaud, a little man with a pity coming fat face. "I knew your step."

Before shutting the door he peered out into the night.

"Tiens!" he said, looking about him, "I thought I heard someone!"

It's a dog or something that followed me down the road," said the doctor. He was glad to be with another man—unconsciously glad.

Michaud listened long and locked it, but as he did so, Dr. Blane got the curious impression that something darted in past his legs like a swift shadow into the house. It was the moment the lantern standing on the steps he had left with it, as though knocked over, and the light was extinguished. Michaud laughed as he struck a match to relight it. He looked rather queer at his visitor for a moment. Dr. Blane declares that to the end he could not be quite sure that he had not himself stumbled against the lantern and so kicked it over.

"There've been here several times to fetch you," the man said the moment the door was fastened, "but I told them you were out."

"Who came?" asked the other with an odd catch in his voice.

"I don't know. I called down from the window, but didn't recognise the voice—some woman, I think. It was too dark to see. I told them to get Dr. Bucommun. He's back, you know," he added abruptly. "Gone to her account at last."

"What, she is dead?" Michaud's voice was curiously hushed as he replied.

"La mauvaise riche." He shrugged his shoulders.

Presently they said good-night and Dr. Blane went up to his room to work or to sleep. They were alone in the house, these two, for Mme. Michaud was away visiting her mother at La Chaux-de-Fonds, and there were no other occupants. He heard the little man thumping about in a room underneath below. Then, presently, all sounds ceased.

Dr. Blane's room was on the top floor—an attic room, with sloping roof, two double windows, a cupboard, a bed in one corner with a mountain sea duver, hot air pipes, a wash-hand stand opposite, and in the centre his work table with two lighted candles. By the bed and table two strips of carpet—the rest pine boards, not even stained. It was all very primitive.

At first he tried to work—in vain. Then, turning his thoughts inwards, he deliberately attacked the problem with a view to solving it and recovering his normal state of balance. He brought to bear upon it all the force of his acute mind, together with his great medical knowledge and experience. But analysis only confirmed things: he was suffering from a singular invasion of utterly unreasoning fear. He was afraid in the depths of his soul; cold and prospering in turns; horribly creepy about the skin; and his hair ready at the least second to rise upon his head. Yet, in his search, he could not name that external and adequate cause. His regret at patient, not even properly his, he admitted was not wholly particonable, but, after all—his mind, in spite of all efforts, came back always to the thought of that horrible changed express sion in his friend's face—the expression of that evil woman's voice, and to the whispered words that had seemed like a curse. "I'm out. You passed me by. I shall not pass you by."

Finally, to steady his mind and possibly to find a measure of relief in expression, he sat down to get an analysis of his mental state on paper. He worked hard. But presently he paused and looked about him. He heard the wind. It had changed, and to him was blowing up over the Lake of Neuchatel. NW and again it rose to a wild, howling cry that made him shiver. The chorus of coldwinter struck one in the morning.

At length, in a calmer state of mind, Dr. Blane, half wondering, half laughing, but still strangely nervous, put out the candles and got into bed.

And the moment the room was dark the noise began again.

There was no internal of guesswork; he knew at once what it was. Something was scratching at the door—outside. And the curious part of it was that the instant he heard it he realised that the door was the sole means of protection. That it was locked was all a useless pretence. The thing could, and would, get in to him. And for one minute, with a nauseous rush of terror, he knew that it was in. It had somehow squeezed itself underneath the door, and was pattering about the room hearth to the side of his bed. And as he heard it, it was already at the second inside him as a very substance of his heart.

The actual distance between door and bed was small enough, but to Dr. Blane, in the state of utter terror it stretched into a hundred yards, and he knew all the prolonged agony that it would take to cover them. He sat, still fastened to the rails must know when in the distance he hears the first rumble of the coming train, for a kind of paralysis crept over him so that he could not move. His heart dropped into bed. The persecution that described him rose instantly into ice.

Then the steps quickened to a measured beat, the beat of a man walking, reaching that ah the goal of glacial world, and something dropped heavily upon the floor. And then it began to climb quickly on towards his face.

Dr. Blane says he tried frantically to shout, but could not move and could not utter a sound.

The steps of the beast-pe treading up the whole length of his paralysed body was the most horrible thing he had ever known. But he had power of movement, and he used it. He turned his head from side to side upon the pillow, while the thing settled down with a tightening grip like an iron clamp on his head.

And there began then the most terrible struggle that he has ever known. He fought with the thing as though it were a human being. He fought with it as though it were a physical reality. He fought with it as though it were a physical reality. He fought with it as though it were a physical reality